

CREATIVE STAFFING FOR THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE WRITING CENTER IN AN ERA OF OUTSOURCED EDUCATION

Jill Reglin
Lansing Community College
penninj@lcc.edu

Ask anyone who works in a community college writing center to list the challenges they face, and staffing will undoubtedly be among their top concerns. Developing a successful community college writing center means first asking the question, “What kind of assistance do students need?” The question that follows is almost always, “Who should provide this assistance?” Staffing a community college writing center poses a set of problems unique to the two-year higher education environment. The recent popularity of contracted, third-party, for-profit tutoring services contributes significantly to these complexities. Third-party tutoring service firms often include a writing lab as part of a package deal with services for other, high-demand support, typically in STEM fields. Attempting to fill gaps in those high-demand areas, college administrators see writing tutoring as an included bonus in the package; but, outsourced tutoring comes with a hefty price tag for the subscription, as well as administrative costs associated with implementation, advertising the service to students, and teaching both faculty and students how to access and use it. More significantly, the practices these companies employ are often at odds with the pedagogical standards embraced by the writing center professional community.

I have seen enough tutoring demonstrations, chat transcripts, marked-up papers, and emailed feedback provided to students by for-profit education companies to say that the type of feedback they offer appears to run counter to what we teach our writing center staff members to provide. The tone of the feedback is often that which would typically come from an instructor, rather than a writing assistant. The suggestions for revision are often generic and/or advise students to follow “rules” for writing that not all writing teachers would embrace. The comments provided often go overboard in terms of wordsmithing—if not outright editing—so much so that a colleague in my own institution suggested we would need to revise our plagiarism policy to accommodate the “feedback” students might receive from such services. Perhaps most concerning, and most antithetical to the work of a writing center, is the absence of dialogue about both writing process and product. It appears that several of these services allow

students to simply submit a paper without a written assignment prompt and without identifying specific topics on which they would like to receive feedback. This is akin to dropping off a paper at the front counter in a writing center and picking it up later.

As writing center professionals, we would be naïve if we did not take these companies seriously. Their flashy sales pitches, promises for 24/7 on-demand tutoring, and growing popularity with college administrators make them our real competitors. We must position ourselves to offer thoughtful, professional input on the quality of these services and explain clearly the pedagogical nature of our concerns. The asynchronous, mostly “canned” and prescriptive feedback, and the absence of conversation about both the writing and the writer effectively strip away the pedagogical function of a writing center. The work of educating the campus community about writing center pedagogy can be tiresome, but it never ends. Neither does the work of designing a cost-effective yet flexible and high-impact staffing model based on best practices.

If the answer to “Who should assist our students with their writing?” is *not* a third-party, contracted tutoring service, then what is it? As a writing center administrator with twenty years of experience in the two-year college setting, I have heard a long list of responses to this question:

1. Peer tutors, and nobody else! (This was my own response not too long ago.)
2. Certainly not peer tutors. They are only a year or two into their college studies and therefore not qualified. We don’t even have English majors here.
3. Peer tutors; they’re inexpensive to employ so it isn’t as wasteful if we pay them to do homework while waiting for students to visit.
4. Professional staff. Tutors need to have a degree, credential or certification of some sort.
5. Professional staff. Someone with a bachelor’s degree can tutor in most any subject area.

6. Faculty! They should be afforded opportunities to work with students in meaningful ways outside of a traditional classroom setting.
7. Faculty are the most qualified to do this work.
8. Faculty should do this work as part of their workload. (Translation: We don't really need a budget for a writing center staff.)
9. And finally: Students have access to faculty during office hours. This is all the help they need.

Though some of these responses are more problematic than others, all are fraught with at least some misconceptions about who is qualified to support student writers. But why should staffing the community college writing center force us to choose student peer assistants *or* professional staff *or* faculty? Why can't we include them all?

The short answer is: We can. The longer answer is: We should strongly consider a multi-tiered, blended staffing model. Peer tutoring is a well-accepted practice with a long history of success. Well-educated peer tutors are qualified and capable of assisting their peers with both writing process and product. They are qualified in ways others are not because they share a social status or space with other students—regardless of level of study or age difference. The power of equal footing cannot be mimicked or taken for granted. This point is well documented by Ken Bruffee, Andrea Lunsford, Muriel Harris, Peter Carino, Stephen North, John Trimbur, and Brian Fallon. It also appears in recent textbooks like the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan and Zimmerelli) and the *Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research* (Janetta and Fitzgerald). Peer tutoring is also strongly supported in the "IWCA Position Statement on Two-Year College Writing Centers."

Employing students as peer tutors affords them an incredible work experience and leadership opportunity that looks impressive on a resume and forms a crucial part of their education. Findings from The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project indicate that skills learned during writing center work are broadly applicable across a wide variety of fields and occupations (Kail, Gillespie, and Hughes). Many of the peer writing assistants we hire have never held a job in a professional workplace before, much less interviewed with a panel of professionals. Those who supervise student employees recognize that they are students first and employees second. According to 2012 CCSSE data, 19% of full-time students work more than 30 hours per week, and 29% of full-time students care for

dependents 11 or more hours per week ("A Matter of Degrees"). A 2017 CCSSE report states, "A student who always considers him or herself a part-time student might identify as a worker who goes to school and is likely to see college as one of multiple competing demands" ("Even One Semester"). Student employment accommodates student schedules, helps promote better work-life balance, provides an enriched connection to campus life, and offers meaningful work experience within a professional but nurturing environment. Student peer tutors are more likely to represent the great spectrum of diversity seen across the student population. Our center at Lansing Community College has hired students with a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds, ethnicities, and countries of origin. Our somewhat small staff currently varies in age from sixteen to sixty. In the twenty years I have been hiring and training peer assistants, I can count exactly two who ultimately did not succeed in their jobs.

The drawback of relying entirely on peer tutors is their longevity as employees, though a January 2017 *WCenter* discussion thread initiated by Clint Gardner indicates that turnover at four-year colleges and universities that rely on peer tutors might not be dramatically different when compared to turnover in two-year colleges. Nevertheless, we normally counted on losing 50-60% of our staff each year when we hired only student employees to provide writing assistance. Some community colleges, such as the Community College of Rhode Island and Glendale Community College, have been successful in requiring completion of a for-credit training course to be taken by students prior to working in the writing center. Though prior completion of a training course results in a well-educated, qualified student staff, the trade-off is a delay in hiring if course completion is required before applying for a job in the writing center. This delay can shorten the duration of availability for employment, as well. A student employee who completes the writing center training course in their second semester might only be available to work for one or two semesters before graduating or transferring. The alternate option of hiring peer tutors and providing paid training is perhaps more attractive; but, it can get expensive if hiring takes place every semester. I would argue, however, that peer tutors are still a bargain for the institution. Paying a peer tutor at a rate of \$10 per hour for a 30-hour training program costs a whopping \$300 per student. Even with indirect costs and the paid time of an administrator to offer the training, the total amount is far from staggering.

Professional tutoring staff (those whose employment is not dependent on being students) add stability and

longevity to a writing center. If job descriptions are written well, at least some of these staff positions can be made available for student employees to advance into after they have completed a certain number of credits, or after they transfer to a nearby university to continue their studies. Professional tutor positions require at least some educational credentials (such as the completion of one year of full-time coursework or even an associate's degree) and prior experience with tutoring. Professional tutors should have job descriptions that require a different level of responsibility than student peer tutors, as well. It is simply unethical—if not a violation of contract within unionized institutions—to pay people different rates for performing the same work. Professional staff should do more heavy lifting, perhaps by handling online appointments, supporting classroom work, engaging in ongoing weekly appointments with students who need more comprehensive support, leading discussions at staff meetings, and mentoring both student employees and newer professional staff. Careful student intake can help to determine what level of support students need and how this level might change as they advance in their studies.

The mistake we often make with hiring professional staff is assuming that they don't need training. Unless they have worked in the very writing center that is hiring them or provided writing assistance in another higher ed environment that subscribes to a writing center philosophy, chances are they do. A degree cannot take the place of exposure to a solid foundation in writing center theory and practice. At the very least, newly hired professional tutors should be provided a set of required readings and an opportunity to discuss them in some forum with other staff early on in their employment. A good balance of professional tutors with peer tutors is also important. What constitutes a good balance varies greatly from one institution to another, but I would issue caution in adopting a staffing plan that is lopsided in favor of professional tutors. Though these more highly-credentialed staff can meet the needs of certain populations of students, the great majority of our students' needs can and should be met by peer tutors. Peer-to-peer learning situations have great potential to destigmatize "tutoring" and promote a non-directive pedagogy often embraced naturally by students working with other students.

The decision to include faculty as tutors within a writing center is indeed a contentious one. My argument for many years in favor of a "peer tutors only" model reasoned that a writing center should offer students help that was substantially different from what they already had access to during faculty office hours.

Overcoming my own reluctance to experiment with faculty writing assistance required me to set aside a fear that the writing center would become a faculty-dominated space. I worried that the presence of faculty in the writing center might intimidate both students and staff. I was anxious that a budget-chopping administrator might decide that the writing center could be staffed entirely by faculty fulfilling non-instructional workload hours. However, if interested and well-qualified faculty are chosen with care and are open to being trained in writing center pedagogy, they can become significant assets in two-year college settings. Faculty work in the writing center can build a foundation for a powerful grassroots WAC program within the institution. Howard Tinberg's research on collaborative reflection among community college peer tutors and faculty documents the power of bridging the unnecessary divide between staff and professors as they work to support student writing.

Having faculty on hand who are content experts in things like molecular biotechnology, religion, art, paralegal study, fire science and mental health nursing has broadened the base of content expertise within our writing center. Their participation as writing assistants has opened our eyes to various styles of writing and documentation. The faculty members have become writing center advocates within their own disciplines and have learned invaluable lessons of their own about teaching writing within those disciplines.

A number of our faculty have come to recognize that they were unintentionally editing students' papers. They have gained insight into how students interpret assignments, causing them to make important revisions to their own assignments. Most have gained a tremendous amount of respect for the complex work undertaken by our student employees and professional staff. We include only six faculty writing assistants on the writing center's staff per semester and schedule them to work with students two hours per week, thereby avoiding the instantiation of a faculty-dominant writing center. Faculty carry the title of Writing Assistant, like all other staff, and students can request to work with them by first name, like they can with any other staff member. Students generally do not know (and do not care) that they are working with a writing assistant who is a faculty member. Faculty are genuinely interested in the training they receive, and several attend our writing center staff meetings, even though this not an expectation.

A multi-level, blended staffing model might not be a good fit within all community college writing center contexts. However, creating a space on campus where student employees, staff, and faculty work alongside each other toward the common goal of assisting

students with their writing based on writing center pedagogy is undeniably powerful. Not only is this approach flexible, dynamic, high-impact, and cost-effective, but it also creates a visible and recognizable center for writing; the synergy that naturally occurs within it holds promise for changing the very culture of writing in community colleges for the better.

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